

THE SEEKER

August 31, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

"Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee
from thy presence?"

--Psalm 139:7 (RSV)

Scripture
Luke 15:1-10

One of the loveliest ideas ever conceived is contained in one of the most intriguing poems ever written. The idea is that God is a seeker. The poem is The Hound of Heaven, by Francis Thompson. I have been captivated by the poem because it reflects my experience. And, in retrospect, it helps me understand my own religious experience...

"I fled Him, down the nights and down
the days;
I fled Him down the arches of the years;
I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and underrunning laughter,
Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong Feet that followed,
followed after."

The common thread that runs through all the Scripture we have heard this morning is the idea in that poem, The Hound of Heaven...

"Whither shall I go from thy Spirit or
whither shall I flee from thy presence?"

the Psalmist asked.

The prophet Hosea reminded Israel of a God who is like a patient and persistently loving parent.

And the God of Jesus, who goes after one lost sheep and turns the household upside down looking for one lost coin... God the Seeker.

It is not the easiest thing in the world to talk about your personal religious experience. Some do it better than others.

Presbyterians generally are more comfortable discussing ideas about God than experiences of God. That fact does not mean that we don't have religious experiences, just that we have a tradition of reticence about discussing them. But when we do talk about them, or when we turn to poetry, literature, art to help us express this most personal experience, what we encounter is a kind of relentless suggestion, from the ancient Psalmist to the contemporary poet, that God is a seeker and that to experience God's reality is like being found.

Leo Bebb, the strange hero of Frederick Buechner's fiction, ex-convict, founder of the Church of Holy Love, head of a religious diploma mill says...

"The kingdom comes by looking for it. The kingdom comes by not looking for it too hard. There's a time the kingdom comes by it looking for you."
[Treasure Hunt, p. 8]

That's exactly what Jesus said one day when he heard that the Pharisees, who were very determined seekers for the Kingdom of God, were disturbed by the kind of company he was keeping. The Pharisees were respectable religious types. Jesus was seen consistently in the company of people who didn't seem to care much about religion.

They were called sinners. They were not, however, bad people. They were the common folk, the poor, the outsiders, the nobodies. It's not that they despised organized religion; it's just that it never occurred to them that formal religion had anything to do with them. They hadn't the sophistication, the time actually. It's nuances mystified and bored them. Jesus apparently got along well with them. He did not spend his time exclusively with them. He numbered among his friends people of substance and position as well. But he was seen regularly in the company of those in society known as sinners.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, didn't feel comfortable with them at all; probably regarded them as a threat to all that was good and important about society, and avoided them as much as possible. They were, after all, unclean. They had not participated in the religious rituals which made a person pure and acceptable to God. The Pharisees believed that to be near a sinner, to break bread with a sinner, was to become unclean oneself.

When the Pharisees saw Jesus of Nazareth who, more and more, was presuming to address them on behalf of God... when they saw him associating with sinners, the Pharisees were unhappy. That is the context, the grumbling resent of religious people, for a series of stories Jesus told.

The third in the series is about a man and two sons, one of whom gets lost in a far country and another of whom gets lost

sulking out on the back forty and how the old man comes looking for each. In the first story Jesus chose a shepherd to make his point. Now shepherds, themselves, were outsiders. There is a strange anomaly in the Bible about shepherds. They are remembered and celebrated fondly: - David the shepherd boy, the beloved Psalm... "The Lord is my shepherd..." But in point of fact, they were despised by society generally in Jesus' day. Shepherds - were among the people in society the Pharisees meant when they used the term sinners. In addition, this shepherd does something no shepherd would do. He left ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness in order to track down one who had strayed. He may be a "good shepherd." Business people would call him foolish, irresponsible. If you leave ninety-nine sheep alone - you may not have a flock when you return. It was an unusual story and it contains an unusual and radical notion of God and of the significance of people - all people - even the people society decides are not very significant. Jesus was saying that God does not abandon a single individual: that God comes looking for lost individuals: that there is something inherently precious about every individual that warrants the search in the first place.

The second story is a variation on the theme. This time the central figure was another outsider - a woman, who had lost one of ten silver coins, a drachma, worth a day's wage. Scholars speculate that the coin was one of ten worn as a headband to mark marital status - that it was the equivalent of a wedding ring. The woman turned her house upside down until she found the coin. "Try that," Jesus was saying to the Pharisees, "as a new image of God" that woman!

The Pharisees called people who did not participate in religion "sinners." When Jesus talked about the human condition, he was more inclined to invoke the idea of "lostness". In his stories "lostness" happens, not so much as a result of evil intent as a kind of aimless drifting. Sheep don't conspire to get lost: they have no appetite for independence. They simply walk from one clump of grass to the next and before you know it they're lost - unless someone brings them back or finds them. Jesus' description of the human condition at least allows for the possibility that people, like lost sheep or lost coins, sometimes get lost because other people do the losing. There is existential truth in that. An astounding number of child abusers were abused children. An astounding number of people who battle chemical addiction came from families where a parent suffered from the same disease. At our best we know that people who exist on the outside - looking in - do not always wish to be there: that as the gap between rich and poor, privileged and underprivileged, insider and outsider - widens, someone must remember that often the system itself excludes. Sometimes lostness happens because someone else did the losing.

But it's easier to talk about sin and so much more satisfying. From the Pharisaism of Jesus day to the present, it has always been the inclination of formal religion to reduce our

diagnosis of the human condition to the least common denominator 31
and to propose with a straight face that Almighty God is 32
concerned with triviality. Christians historically have been more 12
adept and certainly more enthusiastic about labeling some acts as
sinful than about dealing with the complexity of the human
condition. If you read the paper you know that some of us are
trying to walk through the uncharted ethical wilderness of 1986
looking at a simple moral roadmap which is several centuries out
of date and it's no wonder no one much listens to us. To
illustrate: Because we disagree with the way the Chinese
government limits its population, the religious right has
persuaded our government to drop out entirely from United Nations
family planning and birth control projects. Closer to home, to
respond to the epidemic of teenage pregnancies by declaring that
pre-marital sex is a sin, or to feel that we have somehow
fulfilled our responsibility to convey God's love and justice by
declaring that people shouldn't do it, is not only irrelevant
but, it seems to me, the twentieth century equivalent of drawing
our Pharasical robes around us.

The task of Jesus' friends, it would seem, is to find lost
people with the compassionate and powerful love of God, not to
point out how sinful they are. When that happens, when religious
institutions reach out in love to all conditions of people who
are lost, healing and reconciliation begin to happen: God's
kingdom comes and people in fact sit up and take notice. Most
important - something very critical about the nature of God gets
communicated in the process.

Lostness may be, after all, the most powerful modern
cultural motif. In William Styron's Sophie's Choice, a superb
novel about a Polish refugee from a Nazi concentration camp, the
idea emerges with heart-breaking intensity. The heroine of the
book has lost her Catholic faith. In the ghastly choice forced
on her, to save only one of her children, she decides that if God
exists at all, he has turned his back, that we are abandoned in a
wilderness, clutching at anything to fill the void.

May I suggest that many of us know that experience. Far
less dramatically, of course, but to be alive today is to know
that the certainties of the past are gone, that the road maps
that guided our parents and their parents, are out of date. It
is to feel lost. And it is precisely the bold assertion of the
Gospel of Jesus Christ that in our experience of lostness God
comes looking for us and finds us:

Thoughtful people of faith have always suggested that the
human search for God, for God's Kingdom, is actually a response
to the voice of a good shepherd who is searching for us. In a
paradoxical way it is precisely when we sense the absence or
silence of God that we know God exists. In a wonderful book of
essays, theologian Joseph Sittler wrote, "Hunger, unabated, is a
kind of testimony to the reality of food. To want to have may
become a strange kind of having." [Grace Notes, p. 56]

It is precisely in our sense of our own need for God that we know God has not forsaken us. "Whither shall I flee?" the Psalmist asked... "If I take the wings of the morning, or dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, or lie down in the fires of hell itself - thou art with me." Even in doubt and denial, God persistently seeks us.

And it is one of the deepest mysteries of faith to which the best of the theologians only allude, that the boundaries of life do not limit God's pursuit of the people he loves. It is religion that thinks it knows who is in God's Kingdom. It is religion that wants to keep up-to-date guest lists for the banquet of the King. It is Pharasical religion in every age that derives satisfaction from knowing who the outsiders are. The religion of Jesus suggested a Kingdom with open gates: a God who not only presides at a banquet - but goes out onto the highway to invite the outsiders, the lost, the confused, ... The religion of Jesus suggests a God like a shepherd seeking every last lost sheep.

God, Jesus taught, is a seeker.

Emily Dickinson wrote longingly about a God she could never pin down, but one always on the edges and in the open spaces of life. She wrote -

"He fumbles at your spirit"

[The Master, Collected Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 87]

Distinguished Presbyterian Theologian, Robert McAfee Brown, upon the occasion of transferring from one Presbytery to another recently, had to submit to doctrinal re-examination. For the occasion he wrote:

"I believe there are little moments when vast things happen; when bread and wine are shared in certain ways: when brisk walks in the woods are shared with certain persons, when children rise up and bless us simply by who they are: when Beethoven string quartets pierce us with both the joy and woe of our being." [Saying Yes and Saying No, p. 11]

"...little moments when vast things happen." God, the seeker, the Good Shepherd, the patient, loving parent who never gives up. God, the Hound of Heaven. God, I believe, seeks us, pursues us, finds us, not always dramatically, with thunder and lightning, but with the mundane events and ordinary people who grace our lives.

It is Mrs. Evans, a 75 year old, tiny, white-haired Sunday School teacher of High School boys for half a century, who endured their irreverence, cynicism, disinterest, and who followed each of them into the Armed Services or College or one of the trades, with her interest and love and who, I can testify,

managed somehow to communicate something of a God who is like that - the Hound of Heaven, the Good Shepherd, the Seeker.

It was the revolutionary teaching of Jesus. The Pharisees never conceived of a God like that. None of us does. Their God was isolated across a chasm of religious purity and righteousness. Their own religion condemned them to a life of trying to catch up with that God, to become good enough to gain admittance to that God's Kingdom. The radical word Jesus spoke was the direct opposite of that. God is the seeker. God goes after the wandering sheep. God misses the one who is lost and laughs for joy when one of his people is found.

It is not easy to talk about personal religious experience. It is not always helpful. May I, nevertheless, have the privilege of suggesting places where I believe God is looking for his people?

I suggest that God looks for us, and gently, finds us precisely in our feeling of lostness: that when we are bothered by a sense of God's absence, God is, in fact, touching our lives.

I suggest that when we struggle with morality, with the enormous ethical questions posed by times in which we live, when the complexity of the situation belies simple answers, our very discomfort is evidence of God finding us.

I suggest that God seeks and finds us in intense battles of conscience, that the God of love and justice finds us precisely where we struggle with concerns of peace, justice, and the relation of God's kingdom to the world in which we live.

I suggest that if you are engaged in a quiet but intense battle somewhere in your internal life, with a matter of integrity, or self-esteem, with a relationship, with an addiction - that the God who loves you like a Father and a Mother, whose love follows you wherever you go, is finding you.

If your struggle is relational: if you need to forgive someone and can't bring yourself to do it: if you need to say "I love you" but can't muster either the vulnerability or the courage, may I suggest the God of reconciliation is the source of that pressure?

And if your most intimate struggle is theological: if you know the language of despair and the dark night of the soul: if the faith which sustained you through childhood slowly evaporated somewhere between Auschwitz and Hiroshima and My Lai: if you hurt because the meaning which you always assumed your life would have isn't there; if you are fleeing from God: if you live with the empty ache of skepticism, may I suggest that in the ache itself something very creative is happening? May I propose that even as we flee, God, the seeker, pursues and finds us.

The Pharisees, to whom Jesus told the stories about the lost sheep and lost coin, needed to hear that God loves the outsider, the lost. They needed the implied reprimand. But, more than that, they needed to hear the gracious word that that Good Shepherd would seek them too, that the loving God would find them in their lostness.

That love, we dare to believe, is persistent, and it is eternal. The Good Shepherd did not abandon the lost sheep. He looked until he found it. The glad Good News of the Gospel is that there are no limits to God's love, no boundaries across which God will not come to seek us. The Good News is that death itself does not constrain God from loving us.

The simplest and at the same time most profound assertion of Christian faith is this:

God will find us. Jesus said it long ago -

"When he has found (his sheep) he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost.'"

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

God our seeker, thank you for not giving up on us. Thank you for pursuing us through conscience, through doubt and despair, for seeking us in our dearest loves and fondest hopes. Good Shepherd, find us and lead us home; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.